

1572/688

CONFESSIONS OF FAITH SHOWN TO BE NECES-
SARY, AND THE DUTY OF CHURCHES WITH
RESPECT TO THEM EXPLAINED,

IN A
S E R M O N,

*Preached in the Meeting-house in Bristo-Street, at the Opening
of the ASSOCIATE SYNOD, April 26th 1796.*

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1796.



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S E R M O N, &c.

2 TIMOTHY, i. 13.

Hold fast the form of sound words.

THE Apostles of our Lord and Saviour did not impose upon the world cunningly devised fables, or the suggestions of imagination; but they published facts of which they had unquestionable evidence, and doctrines founded on those facts, which they were taught by immediate revelation. Their doctrine, therefore, was not various and multiform, like the shifting systems of impostors; but in every place, and on all occasions, they presented to the attention and the faith of mankind, a consistent and unaltered collection of truths. The religion which they taught being entirely a matter of divine revelation, they were not at liberty to give scope to their talents, if they had any, for curious and subtle speculation, that copious source of variety of opinion, as the numerous and contradictory systems of the

Heathen philosophers fully attest. They enjoyed the advantage of an infallible standard, which they were not so foolish as to abandon, for the vain traditions of the Jews, or the fanciful theories of the Greeks.

As the Apostles, with scrupulous fidelity, delivered to the world the truths which they had received from their Master; so they used their utmost endeavours to preserve them pure and unsophisticated, by carefully instructing those persons who were intrusted, under them, with the dispensation of the gospel. This is evident from many places of the New Testament; and, in particular, from the text now read; in which Paul exhorts Timothy, the evangelist, to *hold fast the form of sound words*. The word translated *form*, signifies a *pattern*, an *exemplar*, an *outline*; and may be supposed to comprehend all the doctrines of the Apostle, with which Timothy had been made acquainted by word and by writing. Many, however, think that something more particular is meant; or that the form of sound words, mentioned in this place, was a formulary or summary of doctrine, which Paul had put into his hands, that he might follow it as his guide in preaching the gospel. If this be the proper sense of the term, it corresponds with the Articles, and the Confessions of Faith, which are still used by the Churches as standards, to which the public and private instructions of their Ministers ought to be conformed. Some have even imagined, that this form of sound words is still in
existence;

existence; and they refer us to that compendious creed, which bears the name of the Apostles. For this opinion, however, there is no foundation; except an improbable, and even ridiculous tradition, concerning the composition of it by the Twelve. But without spending time in endeavouring to ascertain the precise meaning of the term, I shall take occasion, from the text, to discourse on Confessions of Faith. The subject is too copious to be exhausted in one sermon: nor do I pretend to be equal to the task. I shall suggest a few things only, which will, perhaps, serve to refresh the memories of my brethren, and to give some instruction to my other hearers.

I. I shall point out some of the purposes which Confessions of Faith are intended to serve.

II. I shall inquire what things they ought to contain.

III. I shall consider the exhortation addressed by Paul to Timothy, and to all the ministers of the gospel.

I. I shall point out some of the purposes which Confessions of Faith are intended to serve, and from which the propriety, and even the necessity, of introducing them into the church, may be fairly and easily inferred.

A Confession of Faith, is a declaration made by a Church, of the sense in which she understands the Scriptures, on those subjects, the belief of which she judges to be necessary, as the condition
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of ministerial and Christian communion. I mention, at present, both these sorts of communion, as suspended on an assent to the doctrinal articles of the Church; because some Churches seem to make the terms of ministerial and Christian communion the same. Whether it be justifiable to exact an assent equally extensive in the one case as in the other, we shall afterwards enquire.

It is probable, that, in the first ages of the Church, her Creed was extremely simple. The Confession of Faith emitted by the Ethiopian eunuch, and accepted by Philip as sufficient, is comprised in a few words; *I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God* *. Some of the Fathers represent these words of our Lord, *Go and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost* †, as containing the only formulary which was used for a considerable time; as if nothing more had been required from a candidate for admission into the Church, than an acknowledgement of the Trinity. It is certain, that the summaries of doctrine which occur in the early Christian writers, comprehend a few articles only; and that some of them are not quite so full as that very short one which is called the Apostles Creed. But the happy simplicity of the primitive times could not last long; as, even during the lives of the Apostles, whose authority was much greater than that of their successors, men

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* Acts viii. 37.

† Matth. xxviii. 19.

of corrupt minds had insinuated themselves into the society of the faithful, who mingled with the truth the errors of Judaism, and the tenets of Heathen Philosophy. An enlargement of the Creed then became a measure of necessity, for the condemnation of heretical opinions, and the exclusion of such as had embraced them. In consequence of the Arian heresy, the Council of Nice was obliged to render the Creed more particular and express on the subject of our Saviour's divinity; and the term *consubstantial* was introduced, as the only term which the artifice of dishonest men could not elude. The errors of Macedonius, who denied the divinity and personality of the Holy Ghost; of Nestorius, who held that there are two persons of Christ; and of Eutyches, who asserted that his two natures are blended into one, occasioned the addition of new articles, by the Council of Constantinople, the first Council of Ephesus, and the Council of Chalcedon.

Having traced thus far the history of Creeds, in order to point out their origin, and to give a general view of the causes of their enlargement to their present size; I proceed, according to the design of this part of the discourse, to lay before you some of the uses of a Confession of Faith, or to state the reasons why the Church must have a public standard of doctrine.

I. A Confession of Faith is necessary as a public testimony to the truth. The testimony of the Church,

Church, it must be acknowledged, is not requisite to give credibility to the Scriptures, according to the doctrine of Papists ; but if it be incumbent on every private Christian to *hold forth in his conversation the word of life*, there is at least as strong an obligation on the whole body of believers, in their collective capacity, to profess before the world the important truths of which they are the depositaries. In reference, perhaps, to this duty, the Church is called the *pillar of the truth** ; because the truth, by her public profession, is exposed to the inspection of all, like an inscription on a pillar, in distinct and legible characters. There are two reasons why the truth should be avowed by the Church. Her exalted Head is glorified in his prophetic character, when his disciples declare before the world, that they receive with a divine faith, on his testimony alone, and cordially love, and are resolved, notwithstanding all discouragements, to maintain those truths which he came from heaven to reveal. Thus they *confess him before men* ; and he hath promised to *confess them before his Father and the holy angels* †. A profession of the truth serves also to constitute a distinction between the Church and the world. It is not a distinction from the infidel part of mankind which I mean, for this would be marked with sufficient clearness, by an acknowledgement of the Scriptures ; but a distinction from those baptized enemies of the truth, who corrupt the doctrines

* 1 Tim. iii. 15.

† Matth. x. 32.

trines of the gospel. With them the Church ought to have no fellowship. She must disown them as false brethren ; and separate the vile from the precious, by opposing to their errors and heresies a representation of her faith, extracted, without mixture, from the pure sources of truth. It was to vindicate themselves from the calumnies with which the enemies of the Reformation aspersed them, in consequence of the wild opinions of contemporary sectaries, that the Protestants of Germany presented their famous Confession of Faith to the Diet of Augsburgh. Their example was soon followed by the other Protestant Churches.

2. A Confession of Faith is necessary to preserve the purity of the truth ; and this, indeed, is the chief purpose which it is intended to serve. It is a standard, with which the opinions of those who ask admission into the Church, and particularly of candidates for the ministry, are compared, that, as they agree or disagree with it, they may be received or rejected. It is a test, by the application of which the real sentiments of the candidate are ascertained ; so that heretics in principle must be excluded from being public instructors, unless they also be, what the history of the Church shows them to have often been, heretics in practice, without conscience, and without morality.

That a Confession, or Formulary of doctrine, may answer this most important end, it must be expressed in human words. A subscription of the Bible, for

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which some earnestly plead, would be perfectly nugatory ; and it cannot be proposed by any man who understands his own proposal, but with a design to deceive. Papists and Protestants, Calvinists and Arminians, Arians and Socinians, profess to believe the Scriptures to be the word of God, and are ready to subscribe them as often as you please. What then would be the consequence of making the Bible the only test ? The Church would be immediately filled with teachers of discordant principles, by whose contradictory instructions the minds of the people would be distracted and unsettled ; many would be poisoned with damnable doctrines, and some perhaps would be driven to infidelity and atheism.

But are not the words of the Holy Ghost preferable to any which men can substitute in their room ? Do not the Scriptures express with clearness and precision, the great doctrines of faith ? To these questions we most readily answer in the affirmative. But besides that the Scriptures may be variously understood, and the idea which one man annexes to a particular expression may be directly opposite to the idea formed of it by another, it is of great importance to observe, that the Bible hath been treated with more rudeness and violence than any other book. Criticism hath been applied to it ; not sober and candid criticism, by which many of its obscurities have been cleared, and its doctrines set in a just and natural light ; but criticism lawless and daring, invested, if I may speak so,
with

with a transubstantiating power, which commands away the substance and leaves the accidents. Christ is still God ; but this signifies only that he is a glorified man : his death was a propitiation and a sacrifice ; but it did not expiate our guilt : he is a priest, the great high-priest of our profession ; and yet he is no more a priest than any ordinary Christian who offers up prayers to the Father : we are justified by faith, that is, we are justified by works. What purpose, permit me to ask, would it serve, to accept from a Socinian an assent to these inspired declarations, when we know that he holds the very doctrines which they expressly condemn ? What purpose would it serve, but to deceive ourselves with our eyes open, and to ruin the Church, while we are fully apprised of the danger ? It is evident, therefore, that to preserve the purity of the truth, a subscription of the Bible will not suffice. Its doctrines must be expressed in human words, which are precise and determinate, because they have not yet been rendered, by the power of criticism, mere sounds without sense ; and these must be applied as a test, of which nothing but downright dishonesty can defeat the design, that no *wolf in sheep's clothing* may be admitted into the fold to devour the flock ; that *false brethren may not creep in unawares to deceive the souls of the simple* ; and that the ministers of religion may receive none into their order who will not walk with them in the unity of the faith.

3. A Confession of Faith is necessary, to assure

the members of the Church that their teachers hold the same principles with themselves. On this head they have a right to be satisfied. If they have not confidence in the orthodoxy of their teacher, they will either desert his ministrations, or listen to him with suspicion, and without edification. To force upon any religious society a man, whose sentiments differ from their own, is to commit sacrilege on the right of private judgement ; a right, which human authority no sooner invades, than it degenerates into tyranny, which ought to be resisted with generous indignation.

I might proceed to mention other important uses of Confessions of Faith ; but as many things remain to be canvassed, I shall pass on to take notice of an objection which is stated against human forms.— To require the subscription of Formulas and Confessions of Faith, is said to be an encroachment on the right of private judgement ; by which is meant the right, which every man has, to choose his own religion, or to adopt his own sense of the Scriptures, without being controuled by the authority of others. This is the unalienable right of all men, for the exercise of which they are accountable to God alone, and without which religion would not be a reasonable service. How is this right infringed by the demand of an assent to a Confession of Faith ? If the language of subscription were, “ We command you “ to believe as the Church believes,” there would be too much ground for the objection. But it
speaks

speaks in a different style: "You wish," say the
 rulers of the Church to the candidate, "to be ad-
 mitted into Christian or ministerial communion.
 We are willing to receive you; but we think it
 necessary first to be informed, whether your prin-
 ciples and ours correspond. In this Formulary
 are contained the doctrines which we believe;
 do they appear to you to be founded in the Scrip-
 tures?" The candidate is not required to adopt
 the faith of the Church; he is only called upon to
 declare whether he hath already adopted it, and to
 testify his consent, by subscribing her articles. So
 far, then, is this procedure from being an invasion
 of the right of private judgement, that it only a-
 mounts to a simple desire on the part of the
 Church, to know what his private judgement of
 the Scriptures is. If it differs from that of the
 Church, he is subjected to no penalty or hardship;
 unless it be accounted a hardship to deny to a man,
 who has no natural or conventional claim to them,
 the enjoyment of important privileges, which he
 will unquestionably abuse. I acknowledge, indeed,
 that when the Church calls in the aid of the Magi-
 strate, and the subscription of her Creed is enforced
 by civil disabilities and pains, the objection is well
 founded, because religion is no longer a matter of
 choice. Let those answer the objection, if they can,
 who approve of coercive measures where conscience
 is concerned. Let them admire an uniformity which
 is the effect of terror; let them boast of the tri-
 umphs

emphs of the Church, when she goes forth arrayed in armour and in blood; let them point to their thousands, whom the sight of the gibbet and the stake hath converted. We will rejoice to behold a *willing people* entering into the Church *in the day of Christ's power, when he sends the rod of his strength out of Zion.*

I shall conclude this head with observing, That perhaps an assent equally extensive ought not to be demanded from the private members, as from the ministers of the Church. The Church of Scotland, I believe, does not make her Confession the term of Christian communion: nor is this the practice of the foreign Protestant churches. I am not so well versed in the history of our Association, as to be able to say whether it was ever enacted by our fathers, that a formal assent to the Confession should be required from private individuals; but I know, that the practice of many of our ministers seems to suppose such a deed in existence. I appeal to the form which they use at the administration of baptism. But to call on our people, not only to declare their firm belief of every word of a very ample Confession, but to assent to several other decisions, and even to the substance of a large volume* filled with difficult discussions, seems to amount to the imposition of an unnecessary burden. We know, that many of them never read all these; we are certain, that of those who have read them very few have

* The Testimony.

have carefully studied them; and yet we make an express assent the condition of Christian communion. Are we satisfied with an implicit faith? Is a mere form, to give it the softest name, of such value, as to be retained at the expence of integrity and truth? Would it not be wiser, after the example of other churches, to substitute something more general, to which the people could give a rational assent, instead of persisting with solemnity to demand, and with feigned satisfaction to accept, what at present, we know well, is scarcely ever given?

II. I proposed to inquire, what things Confessions of Faith ought to contain.

I begin with this general observation, that Creeds should contain truth, and nothing but truth. It is evident, that on this occasion the term *truth* is used in a limited sense; for many things are true, the belief of which constitutes no part of the duty and profession of the Church. It is religious truth alone with which she is concerned. With respect to articles of faith, she is not possessed of a sovereign and uncontrollable power. There is a wide difference between her, and other voluntary societies; for while they have an unbounded right to circumscribe their privileges as much as they please, she can claim no discretionary power, but must be implicitly guided by her infallible standard. It is her province, not to make terms of communion,
but

but to extract from the Scriptures, and exhibit to the world, those which he hath made, *who hath the keys of the house of David ; who openeth, and no man can shut ; who shutteth, and no man can open* *. It follows, therefore, that the unscriptural decrees of Popes, and Councils, and Synods, and all the human dogmas, and uninstituted ceremonies, on an assent to which ecclesiastical communion hath been suspended, are mere rubbish, which will ere long be swept out of the temple of God. But, on this part of the subject, it is necessary to be more particular.

A Confession of Faith ought to contain fundamental articles, or those truths which are the foundation on which the whole structure of religion rests ; which constitute the essence of religion ; and the knowledge of which is necessary to salvation. A creed, in which any of these is wanting, is inadequate to the purposes which such a composition is intended to answer. Divines have pointed out several marks, by which fundamental doctrines are distinguished. It is certain, that they lie among those which are clearly revealed : for, as they are necessary to be known by the unlearned as well as by the learned, by babes in Christ as well as by full grown men, they must be discoverable without profound investigation, or the aid of critical skill. An attempt, however, to select and classify them, to count their number, and exhibit them detached from

* Rev. iii. 7.

from other truths, is hazardous, and indeed is not free from the charge of presumption. It is an usurpation of the prerogative of God, who alone can determine the exact measure of knowledge which is required to salvation. Yet, as they are perfectly obvious, it is almost impossible that a Church, which impartially searches the word of God for her creed, can miss any of them; though she may not be able, with exactness, to define the boundary which separates them from other truths equally clear, and nearly allied to them.

2. A Confession of Faith should contain some truths which are not fundamental. Some truths, though the knowledge of them be not indispensably necessary, may yet be exceedingly important, by their great usefulness in the Christian life, and their influence on the order, and peace, and prosperity of the Church. I shall instance in Church-government, which, how important soever, none of us, I trust, are so bigotted, as to account a fundamental article of religion. There are two opinions concerning Church-government; the one, that a particular form is laid down in the Scriptures; the other, that the form is left to be settled by the judgement and discretion of men, and may be varied according to circumstances. It is not my present business to consider these opinions, and to show, that, according to the doctrine of our Church, the first is agreeable to truth. It is only necessary to make it appear, that, on either of these principles,

an assent to the form adopted by a Church may be justly required as a term of admission into her fellowship. If the Lord Jesus Christ hath prescribed a particular form, it is plain, that the interests of the Church will so much depend on her exact organization and government according to that pattern, that her rulers would be inexcusable, if they should treat it as an indifferent matter, and permit those to enter into her bosom, who, holding other principles on the subject, might weaken the beneficent energy of her constitution, and at length perhaps effect an alteration. But suppose that no particular form were prescribed, yet, as unanimity, and peace, and brotherly love, are essential to the welfare of the Church, it would be prudent to exclude persons of jarring sentiments about the mode of her government, lest disputes should arise, and terminate in bitter animosities, and open divisions. I may add on the point now before us, that, as the truths of the gospel are perfectly systematic, though they are not exhibited in a systematic form, as they are intimately connected by various relations and dependencies ; the holding of fundamental articles, necessarily leads us to embrace many other subordinate truths.

3. A Confession of Faith ought not to contain all the truths of divine revelation, though it were possible to crowd them into it. A Church should not require, as a term of admission, an uniformity of sentiment in every particular. Every part of revelation

lation is equally true ; but every part is not equally important. It is as true, that Paul was born in Tarsus, a city of Cilicia, as that Jesus Christ was born in Bethlehem of Judah. There are two extremes, against which a Church, when she is employed in framing her articles, ought to guard with the utmost care. It is dangerous to make her terms of communion too loose ; and it is dangerous to make them too strict. Some, however, imagine, that the danger lies entirely on one side. It is easy to make the door too wide ; but it cannot be made too narrow. The same things are necessary, in their opinion, as the foundation of Church-fellowship, which are necessary to perfect the faith of the individual. Because a man is bound to receive every part of divine revelation, and every consequence from it as true, he ought to exact the same measure of knowledge from his neighbour, before he will walk with him as a brother. But, by the same rule, he will be excluded by a third person of superior attainments, and this man by a fourth ; till we arrive at the individual who excels all his brethren, and must, therefore, dwell alone in the midst of the earth.

Let us bestow a little attention on this subject. The question is not concerning the utility of truth : for to every divine truth we ascribe a portion of utility, or a tendency to illuminate the understanding, and through that medium, to influence the heart. It is a very distinct question, whether the

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perception

perception of every truth which I perceive be the condition, on which alone I ought to associate with another man in ecclesiastical fellowship? A decision in the affirmative, can only be authorised by express precepts of Scripture, by apostolical example, or by the nature of the case.

But so far is the Scripture from resting communion on an uniformity of sentiment, that, on the contrary, it prescribes the duty of forbearance. He who commands us to *contend earnestly for the faith*, commands us also to *forbear one another in love, and to keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace* *. Now, what room is there for forbearance, when every man's mind answers to that of another, as in water face answers to face? In tolerating my neighbour, I only tolerate myself. While I imagine that I love him, I am probably enamoured of my own likeness; and self-approbation is the source to which my seeming regard to him may be traced. There is no trial of my love by some disparities and discordancies of sentiment, which I overlook for the sake of his grand qualifications; there are no failings in his intellectual part, over which I may throw the mantle of charity. No; our Creed is a very accurate mould, in which features and lineaments are so distinctly marked, that every man who hath been cast in it, sees himself in his brother.—Perhaps forbearance was only necessary in the infancy of the Church, and ought to be rejected as a badge of childhood

* Eph. iv. 2, 3.

childhood by us, who live in its advanced age. What charter can the abettors of very strict communion produce, authorising them to impose their minute distinctions, their obscure inferences from Scripture, on other men? Have they discovered, that there is no crime, of which a church-member can be guilty, but that of obeying the apostolical exhortation, *Haſt thou faith? Have it to thyſelf before God* *. Is it not a greater crime, to cauſe ſchiſms and diviſions, by an inflexible adherence to certain points, which will never be proved to be eſſential to the perfect conſtitution of the Church?

Apoſtolical example, inſtead of favouring the opinion which is the ſubject of our preſent diſcuſſion, ſtands in direct oppoſition to it. Let us attend for a moment to the conduct of Paul, when diſputes aroſe in the Church of Rome, concerning the obſervance of holidays, and the diſtinction of meats. It is certain, that, at that time, the ceremonial law was aboliſhed; and that the Chriſtian who obeyed any of its abrogated precepts, acted inconſiſtently with his character, and his privileges. *Wherefore, if ye be dead with Chriſt, from the rudiments of the world,* ſays the Apoſtle to the Colofſians, *why, as though living in the world, are ye ſubject to ordinances* †? Nay, the obſervance of the ceremonial law might, with much plauſibility, have been interpreted, by illiberal minds, to be a denial that the Meſſiah was come, and an impious contempt

* Rom. xiv. 22.

† Col. ii. 20.

contempt of the liberty of the gospel. Yet Paul does not command such of the Romans as were more enlightened, to expel from their communion their weak and scrupulous brethren ; though their conduct would have better justified this measure, than our present differences of opinion, concerning remote transactions of our fathers, and the power of the civil magistrate about religion, which in our case is a mere speculation *. No ; says the Apostle, *Him that is weak in the faith, receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations* †.

The opinion which we are now considering, can as little be proved from the nature of communion. From some hints which have been already thrown out, it appears, that this principle, if strictly acted upon, would destroy all communion on the earth ; as perhaps, two men, if permitted freely to conduct their researches, will not be found to coincide in all their views ; and therefore, the supporters of this system, when they have strained matters beyond all reasonable bounds, are obliged to contradict themselves, by leaving the human mind to its liberty. Men may affix arbitrary ideas to words, and thus engender a train of errors and useless disputes. But surely a plain and unprejudiced man would never suppose, when a *Church* is mentioned, that an association is meant, of men equally enlightened on every topic, who could not, without a crime, exercise

* See Note at the end of the Sermon.

† Rom. xiv. 1.

cise forbearance in any matter of belief. I shall only add, that since God hath endowed men with various degrees of understanding, and the Spirit distributes his illumination as he wills; since they are placed in different ranks and connections, and are wonderfully diversified, by their habits and associations of ideas; it is altogether chimerical to expect, that on every subject they shall think exactly alike. An attempt, therefore, to produce uniformity of sentiment in every point of religion, is an attempt to reduce all minds to one standard; and it can have no other effect, than to tempt men to be hypocrites, or to check the progress of their understandings, lest they should stumble on some discoveries, which, if honestly avowed, would subject them to inconvenience.

III. Let us now consider the exhortation which Paul addresses to Timothy, and to all the Ministers of the Gospel: *Hold fast the form of sound words.*

By this exhortation, the following things are suggested:

1. The truths which we profess, we ought cordially to believe. A firm belief of them is certainly a prerequisite, without which the duty enjoined cannot be performed. The subscription of a Creed, or Formula, should be a voluntary action, founded in a hearty assent to its articles. If, while we solemnly subscribe, we disbelieve them, or even doubt of their truth, we deceive the Church, and
expose

expose ourselves to the reproaches of our own consciences. Let us embrace the truths of revelation with a divine faith; for, if they be only matters of opinion, our hold of them is very slight, and we will easily part with them in the day of temptation.

2. We must make the truths which we believe the subject of our public instructions. These are the treasures out of which the good steward will bring things new and old. Let us never imitate the base and disingenuous conduct of those churchmen, who teach doctrines directly opposite to those to which they have vowed in the most solemn manner to adhere.

3. We must maintain those truths notwithstanding all discouragements. The doctrines which we preach are not more fashionable now than they were in the days of the Apostle, when they were a *stumbling-block to the Jews, and foolishness to the Greeks* *. In the world's vocabulary, they are irrational, absurd, enthusiastical, mystical, licentious. The Spirit calls them, *the grace of God, the power of God, the wisdom of God, the doctrine according to godliness, the truth as it is in Christ Jesus*. Judge now, which of these testimonies we ought to believe.

4. It follows, that we ought not to exchange them for new opinions, however plausibly supported. Error puts on the dress of truth, or she would not be received in the world; but a wise man, by narrowly

* 1 Cor. i. 23.

rowly inspecting her, will detect the imposture. Have we found the truths which we profess, in the Scriptures? We may confidently pronounce every contrary doctrine to be a lie.

These particulars I have not time to illustrate at length. It may suffice to have pointed out our duty with respect to our *form of sound words*, on the supposition, that all its words are sound, or that its doctrines have been fairly and accurately deduced from the Scriptures. But there is a material difference between our form, and that of which the Apostle speaks in the text. That form having been delivered to Timothy by an inspired man, it could not contain any mistakes, or admit of review and correction; whereas our form, like every other human composition, must be tried and judged by the infallible standard. They who receive our Confession of Faith, because it was framed by their fathers, who were men of wisdom and piety, ought to pass over to the Church of Rome, which alone boasts of unerring decrees. We do not, like the Heathens, prostitute our reason by a tame submission to the dictates of human authority. "The traditions of our fathers respecting religion," says one of the dialogists in Cicero concerning the Nature of the gods, "we ought to believe, though no reason be assigned for them." No; every man, before he subscribes the Confession, should examine it with the utmost deliberation and care; and, even after his subscription, he must continue

to compare it with the Scriptures, unless it be supposed that his judgement at that particular period was infallible ; and, by consequence, that investigation must be for ever suspended as presumptuous and vain. Confessions are framed on this principle, that legitimate consequences from Scripture, though expressed in human words, are as much a part of revelation as the propositions on which they depend. But as these consequences were drawn by minds liable to error, no man can safely and rationally assent to them, till he have himself deduced them in the exercise of his own faculties. There is room, therefore, for examining and reviewing all human Creeds and doctrinal Articles. It is possible that our Fathers have erred. Does any man startle at this assertion ? I will address him in the words of an eloquent writer of the ancient Church * : “ God
 “ hath given to all their portion of wisdom, that
 “ they may investigate unknown truths, and exa-
 “ mine those which are already discovered. Our
 “ ancestors did not excel us in wisdom, because
 “ they were prior in time ; for that which is com-
 “ mon to all, cannot be monopolized by a few,
 “ All are endowed with faculties for investigating
 “ truth ; and they therefore abuse their faculties,
 “ and renounce the wisdom which God hath be-
 “ stowed upon them, who, without examination,
 “ adopt the opinions of their fathers, and submit,
 “ like the brutes, to be guided by others.” In support of these very sensible reflections, let me ask,
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* Lactantius, lib. ii. cap. 7.

Is wisdom confined to one age ; and do intellectual talents degenerate as the world approaches to its close ? Are the Scriptures less intelligible to us than to the men of former days ; or was the promise of the Holy Ghost, *to lead men into all the truth*, made to our progenitors alone ? Let us not be antiquaries in religion, and admire nothing but what is old. It is possible that our Fathers have erred : it is possible that they have supposed some things to be true, which are not true ; and have made some things terms of communion, which should have been left to be matters of forbearance. If any thing of this description shall be discovered by a Church in her standards, what ought she to do ? Shall she continue to hold it fast ? No ; she must abandon it immediately, as our Fathers themselves would have done, if it had appeared to them in the same light.

I know nothing which can, with propriety, be objected to this measure, even when the point to be abandoned is laid aside, not as an error, but as an unnecessary article. The danger of innovation is a senseless cry, which was raised against Christianity itself at its first appearance ; and is belched out by timidity, bigotry, and self-interest, against every species of reform. Truth is an innovation, when it comes in the room of error. But does not an Apostle say, *Whereunto we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule, let us mind the same things* * ?

D. 2

Yes ;

* Phil. iii. 16.

Yes ; but his words are not applicable on the present occasion. For, first, To call a point in dispute an attainment, is to call it a truth ; and this is only a begging of the question, by which nothing is proved. Secondly, Though the point in dispute be a truth, it is not an attainment, unless it deserve to be made a term of communion ; and to this rank, as we have shown, every truth is not intitled. If it can be proved, that the Church hath, in any instance, too much limited her fellowship ; if she hath imposed conditions of admission, which are not necessary to preserve the purity of the great truths of the gospel, and to maintain order and peace ; she is so far from forsaking her attainments, when she takes off such limitations, that, by that very step, she makes a nearer approach to perfection.

I have now, my Reverend Fathers and Brethren, stated my sentiments on the several parts of this subject ; and I trust that they have been acceptable. It is the glory of our Church, that though she hath now subsisted for a long period, she hath stedfastly adhered, during all the time, to the doctrines of the Reformation. In this respect we have few rivals. God grant that we may be enabled to *hold fast the form of sound words* in our day ; and that our successors, through many generations, may, with fidelity and zeal, support the same glorious cause. A Church which hath renounced the truths of the gospel, is a mere worldly society, or rather a band
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of conspirators against Christ and his kingdom. Since, then, we are cordially united in the belief of the great doctrines of religion, let no smaller differences of opinion alienate our hearts from each other, or interrupt our Christian fellowship. Do you embrace one another as brethren, though you perceive some defects in one another's characters, some imperfections in obedience, some instances of imprudence, some evidences of prejudice and passion? And will you not bear with one another in those cases in which your understandings seem to labour under the same weakness; in harmless disagreements about minute matters, in variety of speculation about topics which have not the least influence on your faith and practice? Will you not bear with those who adore the same divine Saviour, trust in his everlasting righteousness as the only foundation of their hope, and maintain the necessity of his grace to regenerate and sanctify the soul; with those who observe the same external forms of religion, and endeavour, according to the grace given to them, to perform the same duties, in their public and private capacity? Will you not bear with them, because they doubt whether a deed of their fathers be obligatory on them; and whether the Civil Magistrate, of whose conscience we have not the direction, as he is not a member of our Church, have power to punish men for their religious opinions? Yes, you will bear with them; you will

will give an example of moderation and love to the people under your care, and to all the churches who shall hear of your conduct; you will live in peace; and the God of love and peace shall be with you. Amen.

NOTE

N O T E.

THE obligation of the National Covenant and the Solemn League hath been recognised by our Church ; and an acknowledgement of it made a term of communion. We have also received the doctrine of the Confession, on the subject of the Magistrate's power in matters of religion. It teaches, that " for
 " their publishing of such opinions as are contrary to the light
 " of nature, or to the known principles of Christianity, whether concerning faith, worship, or conversation,—men may
 " be proceeded against—by the power of the Civil Magistrate," chap. xx. 4.—That " Magistrates ought to maintain *piety* : " That " the Magistrate hath authority, and it is his duty to
 " take order, that unity and peace be preserved in the Church,
 " that the truth of God be kept pure and entire ; that all
 " blasphemies and heresies be suppressed ; all corruptions and
 " abuses in worship and discipline be prevented or reformed ;
 " and all the ordinances of God duly settled, administered, and
 " observed : for the better effecting whereof, he hath power
 " to call synods, to be present at them, and to provide, that
 " whatsoever is transacted in them be according to the mind
 " of God," chap. xxiii. 2. 3. See also Larg. Cat. Quest. 108. 109.

It is now proposed to make an alteration on these articles ; or, in other words, to receive the whole doctrine of the Confession of Faith, except those passages concerning the Magistrate's power about religion ; and instead of an acknowledgement of the formal obligation of the Covenants, to require only an approbation of them, as a solemn engagement on the part of our fathers to adhere to the truths of Christ, and transmit them to posterity ; and a declaration of our belief, that in virtue of these Covenants, additional guilt will be incurred by us, if we shall renounce Reformation-principles. It is evident, that he who entertains scruples about the power of the Magistrate *circa sacra*, must also call in question part of the matter
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of the Covenants, as well as the manner of enforcing them. I must, for want of room, refer the reader to the Covenants, in which he will find the said power explicitly maintained. The National Covenant was enforced with civil pains. See Act of Assembly 1639, and Act of Parliament 1640, prefixed to the Covenant.

I earnestly beg those who shall read this Note, to observe, that it is not intended to condemn those articles, or to say, that the Magistrate has no power about religion, and that the Covenants are not formally binding on posterity. The Synod has no design to proceed to so violent a measure. It is only proposed to make these points matters of forbearance. He who believes the power of the Magistrate *circa sacra*, and the formal obligation of the Covenants, may continue to believe as before, with this difference only, that he shall not make his faith on these subjects a standard to which his fellow-Christians in our Church must conform. On the other hand, he who thinks that the Magistrate has no such power, and that the Covenants are not formally obligatory on posterity, shall be allowed, notwithstanding his opinion, to enjoy all his privileges, if he assent to the other articles which we think it necessary to retain. The forbearance shall be mutual; neither party shall assume any dominion over the faith of the other. He who opposes forbearance, insists on one of these two things: either that those who entertain scruples shall seek relief to their consciences, by leaving our Church; or that they shall preserve her unity and peace, by basely professing with their lips what they do not believe in their hearts. Yes; he is determined to force his brethren to be hypocrites and liars, or to rend our society in pieces; and this is an event so melancholy, that every thing which can be lawfully done ought to be done to prevent it.

As I have shown in the Sermon, that a Church may permit some things to be matters of forbearance, the only question to be considered is, Whether the articles specified be of such a nature, that forbearance may be exercised about them. Let

us begin with the Covenants. Against the exercise of forbearance with respect to them, it may be objected, that it is criminal not to acknowledge a moral obligation; and that the interests of the Church will be endangered, if this security of her doctrine, worship, and government, be parted with. But, if the Covenants be binding on posterity, their obligation is not so clear as the obligation of truth, of justice, and of charity. It is not so clear, as that of many of the duties called moral, which, when plainly stated, commend themselves to every man's conscience. Their obligation is proved by the Covenant made with the Israelites, in which their children, and *he that stood not with them that day*, were included; by the Covenant with the Gibeonites, the violation of which by Saul, after the interval of four hundred years, was punished by a famine; and by the story of the Rechabites, recorded Jer. xxxv. But every mind is not able to perceive the force of this consequence, that a covenant made by our fathers is binding on their posterity, because the Covenant which God made with the Israelites was binding on theirs. The Sovereign Lord of all may impose on his creatures an obligation, by any mode which seems best to his wisdom; but how does this prove, that parents may, without his express injunction, lay obligations on their children, by constituting themselves their federal representatives? The covenant with the Gibeonites was a civil transaction. Such covenants are allowed, by all civilised nations, to be obligatory on posterity; and no man will deny, that to oppress and destroy an unarmed harmless people, who rely on the public faith, is a crime, deserving the severest punishment. This case seems to have little resemblance to the religious covenants of our ancestors. Jonadab the son of Rechab, commanded his posterity not to drink wine. To suppose, however, that he had a *right* to restrain them, is to suppose, that parents have a right, at pleasure, to debar their children from the enjoyment of the goodness of Providence; whereas the Spirit says expressly, that *they depart from the faith, who command to abstain from meats, which God hath created to be received with thanksgiving*. Yet their obedience is

commended as an expression of filial piety ; and probably it was the more applauded, because it exhibited so striking a contrast to the undutiful conduct of the Jews towards God. The passage authorises us to draw this inference only, that God highly approves of the respect of children for their parents. I mention these things, not to disprove the formal obligation of the Covenants ; but to show that some of the arguments for it do not carry demonstration along with them. The impropriety, therefore, seems to consist, not in leaving out, but in retaining a subject of doubtful disputation, as a part of our Creed. Nothing but what is plain, or may be easily made plain to the meanest capacity, should be admitted among our terms of communion. On dubious points, *let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind, and have faith to himself before God.*

But if the formal obligation of the Covenants be not acknowledged, the Church will lose the security given by them to her doctrine, worship, and government. To this objection I answer, That if a man believes all the truths contained in the Confession of Faith, and acknowledges himself to be bound, by the paramount authority of God, to maintain and defend them, he gives all the security which the Church can reasonably demand from him. Would it not be absurd to exclude from a society, a man who declares himself to be obliged by the highest possible authority, the authority of Heaven, to adhere to certain articles of confederation, merely because he cannot farther say, that he is sensible of an unspeakably inferior obligation, resulting from a remote transaction of his fathers ? Can none be faithful friends to the doctrines of the gospel, and to the laws and ordinances of Christ, unless they enter into a covenant, or be parties to one already made ? Alas ! what a sweeping sentence ! It pronounces the condemnation of all Christians, except a few Dissenters ; of all the Church of God, from the days of the Apostles, till about two hundred years ago : for though I have read ecclesiastical historians, modern and ancient, I never heard of covenanting before that period. Where then is the danger of leaving this article out of our Creed ?

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We shall not cease, I trust, to be good Christians, good Presbyterians, good Seceders, zealous for the truth, and active in its service.

Let us now consider the other article, the power of the Civil Magistrate in matters of religion. It ought not to surprise any, that some have formed such a notion of the spiritual nature of the kingdom of Christ, as to think, that it is entirely distinct from the kingdoms of the world; and that he alone has a right to interfere in the management of its affairs. If this be an error, it is a pardonable one. The Head of the Church will not severely censure the man, who is so tender of his prerogatives as not to approve of any thing which even seems to encroach upon them. Is it a crime to believe, that conscience is so sacred a thing, that no means should be employed which have the least tendency to compel it? Our Confession says, that "God alone is the Lord of the conscience." It is not every mind which can perceive the consistency of this assertion with the power ascribed by the same Confession to the Magistrate. Besides, some think, that the vesting of that power in him constitutes him the sole judge of doctrine: for how shall he take order, that blasphemies and heresies be suppressed, but by first judging what opinions are heretical and blasphemous? Nothing can be more foolish than to say, that he is not to judge for himself, but to follow the advice and direction of the Church: for *first*, according to this scheme, he must divest himself of his own reason and conscience, and substitute the reason and conscience of others as the rule of his procedure; and *secondly*, it only transfers the right of judging concerning doctrine from one to many, from the Civil Magistrate to the Church. But what right has the Church to judge for me, any more than the Magistrate? She may indeed declare the truth, and tell me what, according to her views, I ought to believe; but if I would act like a Christian and a Protestant, I must judge for myself, by employing my own faculties in the study of the Scriptures.—Can men who have such scruples on this subject, continue to assent to the doctrine of the Confession? No, they cannot. What advantage would the Church derive from their assent? Would

Would her interests be secured by hollow professions, and a pretended faith?

The power of the Civil Magistrate *circa sacra* is, in our case, a pure speculation: Our practice hath not the most distant connection with it. The Civil Magistrate is not a member of our Church: we are not the keepers of his conscience: he is not applying to us for advice. Why should we dispute about questions which we are not called by our circumstances to consider? Why should we refuse to hold fellowship with one another, unless we perfectly coincide in our sentiments with regard to what a person, who belongs to another Church, has a right by his office to do; how far his power extends; and whether he has any power at all? What would you think of a Church, which should resolve to receive none into her bosom, who do not believe that the sun is placed in the centre of the system to which we belong! The discussion of such abstract questions falls not within the province of the Church; and the power of the Magistrate about religion is such an abstract question. It is the same thing to us, whether the Church be connected with the State, or distinct and independent; for we are no part of the National Establishment. I cannot clearly discover the value of such principles as have no relation to practice: I cannot conceive at all the propriety of elevating them to a place in our standards.

It is scarcely necessary to add, that this question has no connection with politics. We are sensible of the many advantages which we enjoy under the British Constitution; and it is our fervent wish, that they may descend as an inheritance to our children, and our childrens children. As a Church, we acknowledge the Civil Magistrate *to be the minister of God for good*. The lying lips of unprincipled sycophants may accuse us of disloyalty; but *we pray for Kings, and for all that are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life, in all godliness and honesty*. We teach our people *to fear God, and honour the King; and to render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, as well as to God, the things that are God's*.

F I N I S.



